

SHAMANISM IN PERAK.



OME acquaintance with the black art is essential to every Malay medical practitioner. Simple remedies for wounds and bruises are generally well understood, and some of the more common diseases—such as fever, small-pox, &c.—are often successfully, if not skilfully, treated with native remedies. Bone-setting, too, is a branch of the healing science in which Malays sometimes shew much expertness. But, if the cause of a disease is not apparent, or if such alarming symptoms as insensibility or delirium set in, it is usually presumed that evil spirits are at the bottom of the mischief, and sorcery, not medicine, has to be resorted to. Arabic works on medicine have been translated into Malay, and there may be read learned disquisitions on the parts and functions of the human body, which, in point of scientific accuracy, are of the age of GALEN and ARISTOTLE. Demoniacal possession, though it has always been a popular theory among the Arabs (in common with other Semitic nations) for explaining various forms of disease, is not an idea which the Malays have imported from the West. Their beliefs regarding the distribution, powers and manner of propitiation of the evil spirits, to whom they often ascribe human disease and suffering, are relics of the days when spirit-worship was the religion of their primitive ancestors. The early rites of the aboriginal inhabitants of Sumatra and the Peninsula must have been modified at some period by Hindu settlers from India, for traces of Brahminical worship are traceable in the rude chants and invocations sung by Malay *pawangs*, to this day, by Muhammadan sick-beds. Where Muhammadanism is strongest, namely in the sea-ports and European settlements (whence a constant communication with Mecca is kept up), Malay ideas on the influence of devils on disease partake more of the Semitic type. The evil spirits are *sheitan* or *jinn*, and pious Arabic sentences are used as charms and invocations. But in remoter districts, downright heathenism may be met with. The

demons to the terrified villagers of many an inland *kampong* have a distinct personality. They must be met by the employment of other demons to counteract their influence, or they must be propitiated by bloody sacrifices.

In the State of Perak, it is usual to ascribe nearly every disease to supernatural agency. Medicine is often dispensed with altogether, and all hope of recovery is made to rest on the result of the incantations of professional *pawang*s. According to the belief of the people (professed Mohamedans for generations and generations!) the mountains and rivers of their country, the ground on which they tread, the air which they breathe, and the forests in which they seek for rattans, gutta, gums and other produce, abound with spirits of various kinds and of varying powers and dispositions. The malicious *bajang* is the most dreaded, for he is a goblin of inveterate hostility to mankind. Scarcely less formidable is the *langsuyar*, a kind of "white lady" or "Banshee," who may be heard sometimes amid the darkness of a tropical night moaning among the branches of the trees or soothing the child which she carries in her unsubstantial arms. The hunter spirit (*hantu pemburu*), who with his wife and child sometimes rushes past the peasant's huts at night in a whirlwind, pursuing with his four ghostly dogs an unseen quarry, is a potent source of evil, and there are many others too numerous to mention.

When the malice of some one of these many demons has caused sickness in a Malay family in Perak, help is summoned in the shape of a *pawang*, or medicine-man, who has a catalogue of spells at his command and is known for his familiarity with evil-spirits. The diagnosis may be effected in two ways. Either the *pawang* becomes entranced and sees (*tilik*) in his disembodied form secrets concealed from ordinary mortals and is able on recovering sensibility to declare the nature and cause of the disease, or else he calls down (*menurunkan*) some familiar demon (whom he has probably inherited from his *guru* or preceptor), and, becoming possessed by him, speaks, at his prompting, words of wisdom or folly as the case may be.

Some years ago I was a witness at a *kampong*, or village, in Perak

of the ceremonies performed in a Malay household for the recovery of a member of it who was lying dangerously ill.

The patient was a young married woman, little more than a child in years, whose first baby was only a few days old. The symptoms, which declared to the Malays so plainly the agency of evil-spirits, were probably paroxysms of puerperal fever and these had left the patient so weak that when I saw her she was lying in an insensible state.

The scene was the centre portion of a large Malay house feebly lighted with two or three oil lamps on the floor. The sick girl lay on a bed in a recess formed by curtaining off a space on three sides the fourth being open. Opposite to the patient, facing her left side as she lay on her back, sat the *pawang*, CHE JOHAN by name, a big muscular Malay, grasping a large bunch of leaves in each hand. Between him and the bed were the lamps above mentioned. On the other two sides of a square, of which the lamps were the centre, were ranged the people of the house, neighbours, visitors and strangers according to their respective ranks. I occupied the place of honour, being nearest to the head of the curtained recess and having it on my right hand. All the men present, myself included, sat cross-legged on the floor. Round the couch were eight or ten women watching every movement of the sufferer and prepared to restrain her if she became violent in her delirium. The whole building was crowded with people, figures being discernible wherever the flickering light of the lamps happened to shed a transient gleam. Polite salutations were exchanged and a few expressions of condolence and sympathy addressed to the relations. The latter described the manner of the diabolical seizure and the behaviour of the sufferer when possessed. It was agreed on all hands that the poor girl lying insensible before us was the victim of demoniacal possession, and that her only chance of recovery lay in the exorcism of the devil who was in her.

Presently the sound of a small drum called attention to the proceedings of the *pawang*.

The drum was beaten by a wild-looking mœnad, who at the same time commenced a shrill chant addressed to the *hantu blian*, or

tiger-spirits, to which class of demons CHE JOHAN's familiar belongs. The air was not unpleasing, the words were difficult to catch, but the lines flowed in an easy rhythm and the metre was very regular. A performer of this kind is essential to every *pawang*, and, as in the present instance, is very often his own wife. She is commonly called *bidu*, or (in cases of royal *séances*) *biduan*.* In the invocation of the tiger-spirits, however, a peculiar nomenclature is adopted for everything, the *bidu* becomes *pengindin*, and the drum which she beats (which has only one end of the cylinder covered) is called *katubong*.

The *pawang*, naked from the waist upwards, had bound about him a couple of cords which crossed the back and breast, being brought over one shoulder and under the other arm respectively. He also wore strings round his wrists.

These cords are supposed to protect the *pawang*, or medium, from the malevolence of the evil spirits by whom he may be possessed. The same idea is found in Ceylon. According to the *Mahawangso*, Vishnu in order to protect Wijayo and his followers from the sorceries of the *Yakhos*, met them on their landing in Ceylon and *tied threads on their arms*.† Among the people of Laos, too, the same virtue is ascribed to ligatures of thread over which a charm has been pronounced. "Le grand remède universel, c'est de l'eau lustrale qu'on fait boire au malade, après lui avoir attaché des fils de coton bénits, aux bras et aux jambes pour empêcher l'influence des genies malfaisants."‡

As the *pengindin* screamed out her chant, the *pawang* seemed to become subject to some unseen influence and to lose control over himself. Sitting rigid at first, holding in each hand a huge bunch of leaves (*daun changlun*), he presently began to nod like a man overpowered with sleep, then he sniffed at the leaves, waved them over his head, and struck one bunch against the other. Finally, he fell forward burying his face in the leaves and sniffing in imita-

* Sansk. *vidharā*, a widow; Lat. *vidua*.

† Tenment's "Ceylon," I, 340, n.

‡ Pallegoix—"Description de Siam," I, 43.

tion of a wild animal. He was now on all fours, and became as violent as the necessity of keeping to the circumscribed limits of his mat would permit. He growled and roared and worried invisible objects on the mat. Presently he sat up again, striking his chest and shoulders with the bunches of leaves, and soon afterwards the music stopped. We had now before us, not CHE JOHAN, but simply his body possessed for the time being by the tiger-demon—*bujang gĕlap* or *the dark dragon*. Henceforth, as long as the *séance* lasted, he spoke in a feigned voice, pronouncing Malay words with the peculiar intonation of the Sakai aborigines and introducing frequently Sakai words and phrases unintelligible to most of the Malays present. Every one who spoke to him addressed him as “Bujang Gĕlap.” The master of the house was the first to do so. Pointing to the insensible form of the poor girl on the couch beside him, he explained that she was grievously attacked by some power of evil, and asked “Bujang Gĕlap” to put forth his supernatural power to expel the demon that was afflicting her. The latter asked a few questions, said the case was a difficult one, and then commenced some fresh incantations.

Returning to his mat, which he had temporarily quitted to look at the patient and to converse with the family, he took up a handful of *bertih* (rice parched in the husk) and scattered it broadcast around him. Then, after much growling and muttering, he rose to his feet and performed a singular dance to the accompaniment of the shrill chant and monotonous tom-tom of the *pengindin*. Presently he danced forward past the lamps close to the bedside of the insensible girl, and then himself chanted a long incantation commencing “*Hei———i———i———i———i jin*” (O ! spirit) the first word being enormously lengthened out. Then he sprinkled the couch and the patient with *bertih* (parched rice) and sprinkled her with *tepong tawar*, a fluid held in a brass bowl and showered about liberally by means of an *aspergium* composed of a bunch of fresh leaves. Then once more he returned to his mat, and the wild chorus of the *pengindin*, which had been momentarily stilled during the ceremonies by the bedside, burst out once more. After this the *pawang* was again seized with the violent symptoms which had attended his first possession by “Bujang Gĕlap.” He

roared and growled and sniffed about uneasily until it was evident from his movements that he wanted to get under the mat. An accommodating person sitting close by lifted up the mat for him and he crawled under it on all fours and lay down entirely concealed from view. The chorus and the drum went on, and I hardly knew which to admire most—the physical endurance of the woman who sang so persistently at the top of her voice without any symptom of fatigue, or her marvellous memory. The invocations were very long, but she never seemed to hesitate for a word. There must, however, have been a good deal of repetition, I imagine.

After a retirement which had lasted for about a quarter of an hour, during which he had kept perfectly still and motionless, the *pawang* shewed symptoms of returning vitality. The mat was removed, and he resumed his seat upon it, yawned, uttered a few ejaculations in his feigned voice, and then sat up to be questioned. A desultory conversation then ensued, the *pengindin* acting as interpreter when the Sakai dialect used by “Bujang Gëlap” was unintelligible to the audience. The result was declared to be that the tiger-spirit had identified the demon which was causing the suffering of the sick person present. A thrill of horror went round the assemblage when this was announced to be a dumb *langsuyar* (banshee). The correctness of this finding was then discussed and it seemed to command popular favour, for it was universally remarked that the patient had been insensible for two whole days, during the latter part of which time she had been quite silent. This was now, of course, accounted for by the dumbness of the evil spirit which possessed her.

The women round the sick-bed now said that the patient was trying to move, and all turned to look at this manifestation of demoniacal power. It was only a momentary access of delirium marked by convulsive movements of one arm, rolling of the eyes and movement of the lips and jaws. No sound escaped from the sufferer, another proof of the correctness of the *pawang's* diagnosis, and presently she was still again, after many fervent ejaculations of *Astaghfir Allah* (I beg forgiveness of God) from those present.

“Bujang Gëlap” continued his efforts for the cure of the patient

for a long time. Again and again he strewed the place with *berthi* and sprinkled the patient with *tepong tawar*. Once he charmed eight grains of *bertih* which were put into her mouth. He chanted long invocations, danced wild dances, and beat himself with his bunches of leaves. But all in vain, the dumb *langsuyar* still held possession of the sufferer. In the intervals of the ceremonies, the *pawang* conversed occasionally with members of the family, always retaining his assumed voice and using Sakai phrases. He even condescended to accept a Malay cigarette (*roko*), which he called by the Sakai word *nyut*.

At length he pleaded fatigue, and gave place to an old man who dealt with a different class of demons altogether. The spirits which he professed to be able to influence are the *hantu sungkei*, or the demons of the Sungkei river, a particular district in Perak.

His method of procedure differed a good deal from that of the *pawang* of the *hantu blian*. Instead of the old woman with a little drum, he had a male *bidu* with a large round tambourine. A single bunch of *pinang* leaves replaced in his hands the two large bunches of *daun changlun* which "Bujang Gëlap" had carried. After the preliminary sprinkling of *bertih* by the new *pawang*, the *bidu* commenced to chant an invocation to the Sungkei spirits, addressing them in turn by name. The symptoms of possession on the part of the *pawang* were convulsive shaking and shivering, especially in the hand and arm which bore the bunch of *pinang* leaves. Both tune and metre were quite different from those employed in addressing the *hantu blian*. The old Sungkei *pawang* proved a failure, for after endless chanting and after he had been possessed successively by "Panglima Raja," "Anak Janggi," "Hulubalang Raja" and "Mambang Dundang," all powerful Sungkei spirits, he was unable to declare anything, and left us as wise as we were before.

What a common incident in Eastern tales is the dire illness of some lovely princess, for effecting whose recovery an agonised father offers half of his kingdom and the hand of the lady in marriage ! There is always some favoured hero who applies some magical remedy and restores the princess to health after the medical profession has been

completely baffled. But think of what the patient has had to undergo at the hands of the unsuccessful competitors, before the right man takes the case in hand ! Think of all the doses administered by rival doctors, or prepared by sympathetic friends, each one assured that he is going to cure the disease and win the King's favour ! I have been reminded of these things sometimes when I have seen or heard something of the treatment adopted in Malay families in cases of dangerous illness. In the household of a Perak Raja, *carte blanche* would be given to any one representing himself to have a remedy, on the occasion of a desperate sickness such as that which called for the scenes which I have imperfectly described. Any medicine offered would be gratefully received and administered, and very likely, before it could possibly take effect, some one else's prescription would be poured down the patient's throat on the top of it. It is thought to be a mark of sympathy and solicitude to suggest and prepare remedies, and they are usually accepted and tried in turn, to the imminent danger, I should imagine, of the unfortunate person experimented on. When a child is born in a royal house in Perak, all the old ladies in the country concoct and send to the scene of the interesting event doses called *salusuh*, which the mother has to swallow with great impartiality. It will be seen from this what an important part unprofessional zeal may play in sick chambers among the Malays. On the occasion I speak of, numbers of friends and relations brought their own specifics, but the state of the patient prevented their use.* I must, however, describe the dedication of a *balei berpusing*, or "revolving hall," which was arranged and carried out at the instance of one of the relations.

* It is right that I should explain that every effort had been made to persuade the family to adopt civilised remedies, and to give up the proposed resort to the *parangs*. There was no English Doctor in Perak then, but the officers at the Residency had a medicine-chest and one or two simple medical works. The head of the family, however, declared that, if the *parangs* were not employed and the girl died, her other relations would charge him with not having done all in his power to save her. English medicines would be thankfully received, but they would be administered in their turn with native remedies. The sex of the patient rendered interference in nursing and feeding her impossible. A large proportion of persons who die up-country in Perak are ushered out of the world by the drum and chant of the *parang* and *bidu*.

It was after the Sungkei demons had been invoked in vain that propitiatory offerings in a *balei berpusing* were resorted to.

The two *pawangs* already present were asked to give their aid, their mats were spread afresh, their lamps re-trimmed, and their bowls of parched rice replenished by officious attendants. Presently, a couple of men brought in a neat model of a Perak mosque. The house of prayer in an inland Malay village is a very simple affair. It is usually a square building with a door or window on each of the four sides. The main roof of the edifice, instead of terminating in a point, is surmounted by a little square crow's nest with a peaked roof. This was exactly reproduced in white wood very neatly and artistically finished. At the bottom of the miniature building was a single bamboo support, the end of which being hollow fitted like a socket upon an upright rod fixed on the floor. The one leg of the model being thus fitted on to a stationary upright, the little house could be turned round and round at will, presenting each door in turn to each point of the compass. As soon as it was fixed, a kind of frill or border, made of young cocoanut leaves with a deep fringe of the same material, was tied round the base of the model so that the ends hung down, entirely concealing the bamboo leg and the simple mechanism by which it worked upon its pivot. This fringe is called *jari lipan* ore "centipede's legs" from some fancied resemblance to the liberal numbers of members with which Nature has gifted that insect. When this had been tied round the miniature mosque and the ends of the fringe had been docked with a pair of scissors by a female slave, so as to admit of the model revolving freely, it was time to fill the interior with the propitiatory sacrifices. This was the task of the nearest relations and of the representatives of the old lady, in accordance with whose vow the *balei berpusing* was being dedicated.

The offerings to demons when made in this manner are of four kinds—*lemak*, *manis*, *masam*, *pedas* (the fat, the sweet, the sour, the pungent). The "fat" consisted of a fowl sacrificed then and there before us. The blood was caught in a leaf and placed in the centre of the miniature building, or *balei*, as I shall now call it. The feathers were plucked out, the entails removed, and the

body divided into joints. Every part of the bird was then placed reverently inside the *balei*, including the feathers and entrails. The wings were tied to the streamers of the fringe outside, as were innumerable sweet offerings—*wajil*, *dodul*, *tebu*, *pisang* (confectionery, pastry, sugar-cane and plantains). I did not ascertain what the sour and the pungent consisted of, but they were no doubt contained in small saucers and other receptacles which I saw being poked through the little doors of the toy house.

When all was ready, the drumming, the invocations and the performances of the *pawang*s began again. Each in turn, after having repeated much of what I have already described, advanced to the couch of the patient and waved the evil spirits away from it into the little *balei*, which was placed close by. The demons were coaxed, entreated and threatened by turns. Each *pawang*, armed with a bunch of leaves dipped into a bowl of *tepong tawar*, guided an indefinite number of the evil ones into the place where the feast had been spread for them. The incantations and waving went on for a long time, and it wanted only an hour or two of dawn when it was concluded that the last of the demons had entered the receptacle. The *balei* was then lifted up and carried off down to the river (on the bank of which the house stood) escorted by the *pawang*s, who with more charms and incantations drove the spirits in front of them to the water side. Then the *balei berpusing*, with its array of delicacies and its freight of wickedness, was set afloat on the river and soon disappeared down the stream in the darkness. The last ceremony was the repetition of a formula as the party returned to the house from the river. One of the men belonging to the family called out to the women in the house "*Sembok betah?*" "Is there any improvement?" And a shrill female voice shouted back the prescribed reply "*Ber-lari ber-jalan*" "Running and walking," in allusion either to the state of the patient, implying that she was up and about again, or else to the hasty retreat of the evil-spirits, I am not quite sure which.

No improvement, however, took place, and though the efforts of the *pawang*s were redoubled on the following night, and the

services of other and more famous medicine-men were retained, the poor little patient never recovered consciousness and died within four and twenty hours after the *balei berpusing*, which ought to have contained all the powers of evil lately afflicting her, had been cast adrift on the Perak river.

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